

# Review: Two Sicilian Chronicles, Translated by Louis Mendola

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*Frederick, Conrad & Manfred of Hohenstaufen, Kings of Sicily. The Chronicle of "Nicholas of Jamsilla" 1210–1258.* Translation and commentary by Louis Mendola. Trinacria Editions: New York, 2016. Pp. xxvi + 375. ISBN 9781943639069. USD 36.00.

*Sicily's Rebellion against King Charles. The Story of the Sicilian Vespers.* Translation and commentary by Louis Mendola. Trinacria Editions: New York, 2015. Pp. xxxii + 295. ISBN 9781943639038. USD 36.00.

These two volumes bring to English-speaking readers two important and largely neglected medieval chronicles that together shed significant light on thirteenth-century Sicily. Excellent editorial commentary and notes add to each one's usefulness and accessibility. Each opens with a gripping anecdote, then a short but informative preface that introduces both the subject matter and the unique characteristics of each account. These in turn are followed by a longer introduction exploring the provenance and literary qualities of each, and the linguistic and historiographic challenges each poses. Surprisingly in such inexpensive editions (\$36.00 US each), included next are sections of maps, illustrations and photographs that breathe life into the places and figures that appear prominently in the text. A concise and highly informative 'Prelude' sets the stage, culturally, diplomatically and politically, for the translation of the actual chronicle.

Because the two accounts differ in character and, I believe, audience, allow me to continue with their similarities before engaging with each individually. Each translation is followed by an informative postlude, epilogue, brief presentations of important personages, chronology, relevant appendices, endnotes, sources and bibliography, and index. In slightly different order, each also presents genealogical tables and some elements of heraldry. The edition of the second listed, that of the rebellion, also provides a transcription of the original, in part because of its rarity as a work in medieval Sicilian, which has made it much less accessible to scholars; the 'Jamsilla', by contrast, was originally in Latin, and benefitted from an excellent translation into Italian in 1868 (6).

As to the chronicles themselves: the earlier account of the kings of Sicily enmeshes us deeply into the many complex military and political actions of Manfred, illegitimate son of Frederick II, who acted as regent for his junior, legitimate half-brother, Conrad II (Conradin). Clearly the favorite of the chronicler as well apparently as of his father, Manfred distinguishes himself on every page as being valiant, prudent, persuasive, indefatigable—the very model of a prince. He dominates nearly all of the account, winning battles against steep odds, retreating sensibly from certain defeat, negotiating skillfully—and at times duplicitously—and retaining the loyalty of his often exhausted troops. According to this account, he only accepted the crown of Sicily because false rumors had reached him of young Conradin's death (though it is hard not to be a little suspicious when a regent effectively usurps his ward's place).

*Caveat lector*, however: while Mendola deserves enormous credit for untangling all the people and places the chronicle names, those unacquainted with the topography, geography and important families of southern Italy and Sicily will find much of this account tough going. It is easy to distinguish principal players (in part because of the helpful brief biographies in the 'Personages' section), more difficult to follow all the intricacies of specific military confrontations. Some generalities hold true throughout: the difficulty of attacking many locales because of their natural defenses; the amount of destruction visited upon an often fickle populace; the mercies occasionally extended to this same populace, who usually had little choice but to follow their superiors; the ambition of the papacy to control the entire *Regnum*; the loyalty and effectiveness of Manfred's Saracen archers and cavalry; and the importance of Manfred's mother Bianca's family, the Lancias. This complex account provides a great deal of information about thirteenth-century Hohenstaufen and papal confrontations, important individuals, and underscores the ubiquity of certain tropes in recounting deeds of military valor and noble behavior. Somewhat astonishing is the frequency with which towns rebelled, were subdued, and then—rebelled again! There is much in the lengthy account (helpfully broken into chapters by Mendola) of interest; this account will most benefit scholars of medieval Italy and medieval chronicles.

As to the second account, of the rebellion: if only all chronicles, and editions of chronicles, were as lively and engaging as this one! Mendola has done magnificent work in producing an edition that combines a rip-roaring good read with sufficient scholarly apparatus to make it useful as both a teaching tool and a resource for researchers.

From the opening words of the Prologue, we are swept into the streets of Palermo and the violence that erupted on Easter Monday of 1282 against the French soldiers who held the island for Charles of Anjou, its absentee ruler.